

Citizenship and Diversity in Palestine: Muslim-Christian Living Together



The project “Citizenship and Diversity: Muslim-Christian Living Together,” a collaboration between the Arab Educational Institute in Bethlehem and the Ministry of Education of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), encourages Palestinian students, 14 to 17 years old, at 30 private and government schools in the Bethlehem and Ramallah areas to learn about “citizenship” and respect for “diversity” through the example of “Muslim-Christian living together” in Palestine. The project aims to prevent Muslim-Christian relations from being hijacked by fear, prejudice, and exclusivism. Christian and Muslim students receive joint religious education lessons in school. The project further organizes journeys to Muslim and Christian holy sites, joint Muslim-Christian celebrations, and an essay competition for stories that are written or collected by students.

An Open and Tolerant Attitude

Inter-religious projects in Palestine, especially those which promote the living together between Moslems and Christians, often take place at the levels of research, publications and conferences, and are usually not integrated into Palestinian education. However, the project “Citizenship and Diversity: Christian-Moslem Living Together” led by the Arab Educational Institute in cooperation with the PNA Ministry of Education involves Palestinian schools that directly implement inter-religious grassroots work among young Palestinian teenagers. This is a holistic approach in which inter-religious learning practices are applied both inside and outside the class. Its aim is to educate Palestinian school students to have an open and tolerant attitude towards different religions.

This inter-religious project started almost 20 years ago and has since then been continuously applied at schools in the Bethlehem and Ramallah areas of the West Bank. It presently involves 30 government and private schools.

One of the unique elements of the project is the organization of joint religious lessons for Moslem and Christian students. At schools with students of different religions it almost always happens that when it is time for the religious lesson the students split up according to religion. In the present project Moslem and Christian students stay a couple of times a month together to learn about each other’s religion. Another important element is the project focus on student-

centered and community-oriented activities. They include discussions by students of moral dilemmas in Palestinian daily life; drama-in-education; fieldtrips to Moslem and Christian holy places, and participation of Moslem and Christian students in each other's religious celebrations.

The project often makes use of stories – especially stories developed by the students themselves.

Objectives (annual)

- 700 Palestinian students in the West Bank aware of commonalities, and respectful of differences between Islam and Christianity
- 5 well-attended public activities in which Moslem-Christian living together is promoted
- 60 teachers skilled in applying student-centered methodologies of inter-religious/civic education in class
- Achieving broad community support for the project involving teachers and other religious and educational stakeholders (parents, informal leaders, imams and priests) as well as educational authorities (district offices Bethlehem and Ramallah, headquarters Ministry of Education in Ramallah)
- A community campaign to spread the project message.

Learning tracks

The project “Citizenship and Diversity: Christian-Moslem Living Together” promotes the educational values of citizenship and respect for diversity through the example of Moslem-Christian living together. The project aims to shift discussions from dogmatic religious differences to issues of daily life citizenship including an active involvement in community initiatives and voluntary work.



Moslem and Christian teachers and officials from the Ministry of Education join an Iftar meal during Ramadan

On the one hand there is learning about the two faiths, Christianity and Islam, their principles and practices; on the other hand, learning how to apply civic and religious values in order to increase respect for religious differences in social and political life. The first track is more about religious studies, the second about civics, although there is overlap.

There is less emphasis in the project on learning about the contents or dogmas of the other's

religion. The project teaches about the contents of religion only insofar as it directly helps to respect the other's religion; for instance, certain beliefs shared by Islam and Christianity (like monotheism).

The central project values are trust, justice, freedom, forgiveness and tolerance (*tasaama*). According to the Palestinian curriculum, the two main approaches to value are: 'thinking' and 'behavior'. The first approach is more related to philosophy and religion and the development and meaning of values, the second on how to translate values in social life and appropriate behavior.

Activities

The schools share the following project activities:

- 6 inter-religious lessons per semester, including essay-writing, and poetry and drama on a selected subject. During these lessons all students, Moslems and Christians, stay in the same class. The lessons cover subjects such as: characteristics of Islam and Christianity; peace and nonviolence in the Bible and Quran; justice and equality in the two religions; citizenship and diversity values in the religions, and the Golden Rule, "do unto others as you would like them to do to you." Skills-based practices include respecting differences in class and careful listening. Students are introduced to educational drama and discussion techniques like the posing of a moral dilemma.
Note there are few, if any, governments in the Arab world which allow for and encourage joint inter-religious lessons at public schools.
- Joint Moslem and Christian participation in social gatherings at schools during Christmas, Ramadan, and Eid al-Adha.
- Guest lectures on inter-religious themes by university professors, school inspectors, and religious personalities.
- Classes participating in visiting Moslem and Christian holy places and other sites in the Hebron, Jericho, Bethlehem, and Sebastia/Nablus regions of the West Bank. Schools are asked to prepare their students in advance for special arts or storytelling performances to be conducted on or near the sites around an inter-religious theme. They are encouraged to be respectful at the sites and learn about Islamic and Christian principles and practices.
- During open and graduation days of the participating schools, many hundreds of parents and others attend and learn about the program. A girls' choir visits different schools and performs at occasions.
- Evaluation workshops with teachers, school principals, students and parents.
- An annual community campaign spreading the project message.

During the project, it may happen that students and teachers reflect upon the political situation. Here above is a poster designed by Moslem and Christian Palestinian youth and

attached to the Separation Wall. The poetry is from Mahmoud Darwish, the prominent Palestinian poet.

RRCA

One of the project methods is called RRCA or: Read, Reflect, Communicate and Act. It has been designed to help building inner-peace through practices of non-violence and communication. It consists of four steps:

1. Reading passages from the Holy Books and from persons inspired by those Books who have developed a courageous practice of liberation from oppression or occupation while maintaining human dignity and respect, such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King did. Reading here implies an active learning and listening attitude.
2. Reflecting upon the passages and detecting commonalities among the different Holy Books in an act of common faith and spirituality.
3. Communicating one's readings and reflections within the group and opening the floor for discussion.
4. Understanding the relevance of the readings and reflections for one's practical life, and looking for options how to act out and communicate the wisdom of the books in the footsteps of those who created exemplary models by practising those words.



An RRCA session led by Fuad Giacaman, project leader

Fieldtrips



Moslem and Christian students near the traditional place of Baptism, Jordan River

The fieldtrips are a highlight in the program since not many Palestinians schools offer fieldtrips due to safety and funding concerns. Besides the project class, other students from the school might join, thus spreading the project idea within the school community. Parents are asked to provide their children with a sandwich. The Ministry encourages to have the buses as full as possible, and facilitates the permit procedures.

Usually four destinations are offered: the regions of Jericho, Hebron, Nablous and Bethlehem. On the sites associated with Islamic and Christian events and holy persons students conduct Arts performances such as drama, storytelling and dance so as to express (inter-)religious values associated with the sites. The informality and entertainment during the trips creates positive energy among students, teachers, project staff, Ministry and project committee members alike. Importantly, the fieldtrips give opportunities to the project choir to perform. In some places, such as Hisham's Palace and Mount Gerizim/Samaritan Museum, there are stages which the students and choir use.



Visit to Hisham's Palace in Jericho, early Islamic period

Choir

Annually 20 training sessions are given for the girls' choir, which now counts 25 students from different government schools. They gave public performances at religious and school celebrations.

Encouraged by the example, one government school in the Bethlehem area established its own girl choir, of over 20 students, under the umbrella of the project. Another school too started a girls' choir, outside the project theme but inspired by the project choir.



Presentation of project choir

Impact

The Religious Education teachers as well as the Ministry of Education are interested to have harmonious inter-religious relations at schools, besides their aim to have the students building up religious knowledge, faith and moral character.

Important for all is that no religious sensitivities are touched, especially the challenging of dogmas or any real or perceived attempts to convert students. Teachers and officials do not want that religious education touches or inflames political sensitivities.

The project has helped to a large degree to combat religious fanaticism which sometimes arises among students under the present sensitive and volatile atmosphere and conditions in Palestine and the neighboring Arab countries. The program assists in increasing the level of knowledge among students, especially regarding the religious other. A spiritual and psychological comfort and harmony is noticed. Knowing and understanding one another is achieved, according to the schools, through constructive dialogue and respecting the differences and not through sticking to one's dogmatic differences. During the implementation, teachers notice a genuine respect to the other's feelings, especially during religious practices such as fasting and the participation in one another's religious feasts like Christmas and Eid Al Fitr. The project helps and encourages students as well as teachers to discuss interreligious topics outside the classroom.

Palestinian schools strive to revive traditions of interreligious living together. It has often been noticed that an open celebration of feasts enhances the atmosphere at schools, and many private and government schools with Muslim and Christian student populations presently organize joint Muslim and Christian celebrations. After studying the concept of generosity in a joint interreligious lesson, one school connected an educational campaign for needy students with the celebration of Muslim and Christian feasts. At another school, Muslim and Christian students initiated a Lenten cooking school day after the fasting period. One Christian government school teacher relates: "During the Muslim *Isra* and *Miraj* feasts [marking the night that God took Mohammad on his journey to heaven], sweets were distributed to all students and I, as the only Christian teacher, felt at ease and touched by such student initiatives."



In Jacob's Well Church in Nablous

The shared celebrations at school give Muslim and Christian students an opportunity to learn about each other's customs and to respect and appreciate them. Typically, the celebrations create a sense of pride and dignity among students and teachers, as well as a deeper feeling of shared Palestinian identity. It is worth noticing that the dissemination of the project message helps to counter violent extremism of any kind, as is felt among teachers, the Ministry, parents and others in the community.

On the level of the content/project curriculum, the cooperation between AEI and the Ministry of Education creates a bridge between the fields of inter-religious learning and civics. The students do not only learn about Islam and Christianity, but are also encouraged to draw consequences of inter-religious learning for their role as citizens in the community/neighborhood, the region and the world at large (global citizenship). In other words, the project moves closer to the important issue how students act out project insights into the real world. This includes encouraging a positive and open attitude in discussions at homes and local communities about Moslem-Christian living together.

The project further helps to develop a project curriculum which connects the concepts of citizenship and diversity with a diversity in methodologies which are both social and arts-based. Dissemination and sustainability is promoted by the fact that some teachers involved in the project are members of the religious education curriculum committee of the PNA.

Over the almost 20 years that the project runs, some 10.000 students have been engaged.

Stories

In 2016 a project book was published that offers a selection of stories from the participating Bethlehem and Ramallah schools. The students narrate exemplary cultural practices of Moslem-Christian living together in Palestine.

In cities such as Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Ramallah, where Christian communities live side by side with the Muslim majority, one can still find many traces of border-crossing traditions. Students in the Bethlehem and Ramallah regions explored and collected stories, among other subjects, of joint Muslim-Christian popular practices, such as Muslims inviting Christians for a Ramadan evening meal, sharing in the coloring of Easter eggs, or decorating a Christmas tree. Many of the stories are not only about popular practices, which, though still surviving, have been somewhat in decline over the last decades, but also about the great power of human gesture – a power traditionally held in high esteem in the Palestinian-Arab culture of hospitality and neighborliness.

Examples abound. Surprisingly, Christians may help to reinforce the customs of Ramadan. On the streets of Ramallah and Nablus, it happens that Palestinian Christian youth distribute water and dates just before the evening breaking of the fast during Ramadan. A student writes about her village and notes that when an imam became ill, the priest tolled the church bells to announce the end of the fast. Similarly, a Christian man is said to once have taken over the role of *mousharater*, the person who wakes up the Muslim believers to take an early breakfast before the fasting starts.

The long tradition of interreligious living together in Palestine has come under pressure at times – not in the least because of the Israeli occupation that may pit Muslims and Christians against each other, for instance at checkpoints or because of religion-based allocation of travel permits. In general in the Palestinian context, solidarity between the religions often has a political

dimension. For instance, a local imam once welcomed Christians to pray at the mosque because their church was damaged during a raid by occupation forces.

The personal human stories of neighborliness, lovingly written down by the students, shine most brightly. Sometimes they are told of parents and grandparents, but several students experienced such priceless moments themselves.

A story of neighborship is told by Lama, a Muslim student:

“The doorbell rang. Muriel, my Christian friend, and her mom were there. She came to wake us up for the suhur [Ramadan early-morning breakfast]. Muriel explained her coming early, ‘I did not hear your voice and was afraid you would not wake up for the suhur as this would keep you, my dear Lama, hungry throughout the school day.’ Then my father invited my friend to share the suhur with us: ‘Please help yourself and share our customs in the same way as Lama shares and participates in your Christian feasts.’ Muriel came with her parents to the evening iftar [breaking the fast] meal and gave me a gift as she entered the house. Then we began to eat. We broke the fast with dates and carob juice, then we all ate. It was a wonderful evening filled with joy. For the moment we could forget about the occupation.”

Sometimes it requires creativity and determination to cross religious borders. One story is about a Muslim girl who desperately wanted to take part in the wedding of her best friend, a Christian.

“My girlfriend and I have known one another since preschool. Providence brought us together, and our friendship continued after graduation. She was the ambitious and successful Christian youth and I was the creative and anxious Muslim girl. We did not feel any difference or sensitivity about religious topics. We were two Palestinian girls living in the same town sharing the same concerns and the same goals. Years passed, and the day of my girlfriend’s wedding ceremony approached. We asked the church parish priest, “Can a Muslim girl be a witness for a Christian bride?” The answer was, “No, this is religion and we can’t change God’s rules.” Later there was a wonderful solution, however. The priest agreed to have me as a second witness in the church as that did not require the signing of any document. My

A project highlight happened during the week-long Educational Encounter of 2017 held by the Ministry of Education-Bethlehem district.

For the second year the program was presented as one of the 4 best educational projects in the district. Among the attendants were a number of top officials from Bethlehem and Ramallah, in addition to approximately 500 - 600 teachers, school principals, supervisors as well as representatives of the local community. The Beit Jala Government School for Girls presented the project through a power point to inform the audience of the program aims, importance and activities. The Ministry created wide publicity to the program. The meeting was covered by the local radio.

girlfriend entered the church and all welcomed her. The moment I entered behind her, carrying the wreath, the attendees stood up and welcomed me wholeheartedly. My happiness was so great!”

Strategic partnership

The strategic partnership of AEI with the Ministry of Education involves on the ministerial side:

- Minister’s deputies, department heads and other officials of the central Ministry of Education in Ramallah
- Heads and officials of the district (regional) offices, especially Bethlehem and Ramallah
- Inspectors Religious Studies and Civics
- Headmasters.

The project supervisory committee includes two representatives of the Ministry, including a RE inspector, in addition to the AEI staff. The AEI coordinators and staff are all senior teachers, (former) headmasters, university professors and former university dean. Besides in matters of supervision and coordination, AEI and the Ministry cooperate in welcoming partners and school leaders from abroad supporting or interested in the project; in together visiting inter-religious lessons at schools; doing joint media performances (radio and TV, AEI newsletter); and making visits together abroad when invited.



On a visit in Jericho

Arab Educational Institute

AEI–Open Windows is a Palestine-based NGO, member of Pax Christi, that is dedicated to empowering youth, women and educators living in Palestine, especially the West Bank. We work through community education and advocacy, the facilitation of local and international

bridge building and exchanges, and the celebration of Palestinian culture and narrative. In our educational approach to empowerment, AEI fosters opportunities for Palestinian voices to be heard beyond the separation Wall and promotes the development of *sumud* or perseverance.

AEI's work is rooted in the values of peace, justice, nonviolence, and inter-cultural and inter-religious respect.

The Arabic concept of *sumud*, literally steadfastness, guides the youth' and women's work at the Arab Educational Institute in Bethlehem, member of the peace movement Pax Christi. At the time when the concept started to become widely used in the Palestinian movement in the occupied West Bank, at the end of the 1970s, its meaning was rather static. *Sumud* primarily meant the determination to stay on the land, not to leave, despite the Israeli occupation. Over the years the concept has come to increasingly stress the *inner* strength of people to cling to their home, not in despair but in dignity - with the feet standing fast and the head kept high. How to strengthen this inner power in the face of a never-ending occupation which leaves a diminishing living space for Palestinians who are surrounded by no-travel zones, settlements, checkpoints and borders? How to hope against hope?

AEI-Open Windows
Bethlehem
Palestine
www.aeicenter.org

Fuad Giacaman, the head of the inter-religious and community program, is co-president of the Arab Educational Institute in Bethlehem. He was the former headmaster of a Palestinian school and taught various curricular subjects at several Bethlehem schools.

Thank You

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A Voice from Bethlehem - Tamara: "I am optimistic, it's part of my personality"

"I am presently at Bethlehem University majoring in English literature. In a way, at school your social milieu is limited. When I was at school, I found that most of the students came from the same social background, whether Moslem or Christian. Now at the university it is different. You have students who come from all different backgrounds – town and countryside. You feel more

that you are part of the society. This is also the case in the youth groups of AEI, you meet different people, and you meet them really – during discussions, events like picnics and parties, during an excursion. There is both learning and entertainment. I like both.

Frankly, I don't make a distinction between Christians and Moslems in Palestine. We are all Palestinians. Lately "religion" was removed from the Palestinian ID. I think that is a good development. When I see new people, I ask them about their name, not their religion. Once I had a friend whom I thought was Christian, but she turned out to be Moslem. I know that in the community some people do care about religion, but the majority does not. I also don't think we have here a real conflict between Moslems and Christians. It is not the same as in Egypt or some other Arab countries. We have a history of good relations. We live like neighbors.



Tamara with a friend

However, it is a good idea to learn about Islam and Christianity, like in AEI's project 'Living in the Holy Land: Respecting Differences.' What I like at AEI is also that you share in each other's feast days and celebrations. For instance, I as a Christian sometimes share in the Iftar – the daily breaking of the fast during Ramadan. In this project we once also visited the Church of Nativity as well as the Mosque of 'Omar, opposite the church. I was a school student then. I never was in a mosque before!

My life has not always been easy. For instance, during the second Intifada there was a lot of shooting and shelling around my family house. In the night I stumbled down the stairs to see what was happening, but all was dark and I fell and broke my teeth. Since then I always had problems with my teeth. However, I am optimistic, that's my attitude, it's part of my personality. About the future? Maybe I will go for some time abroad as it is so difficult to find work here. I want to continue my translation and language studies. But I always will also work for Palestine. I stay hoping for a solution between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Maybe it will not happen now or any time soon. After all, how long did it take before the Wall fell in Berlin?